

# Industry Growth Propels Need for Physician Recruitment, Retention

By Michael Stone | June 3, 2016



U.S. job growth over the next eight years is expected to be spearheaded by health care.

From 2014 to 2024, service jobs are predicted to account for almost 95 percent of all new ones in the U.S. — a total of 9.3 million jobs — according to Bureau of Labor Statistics data released in December 2015. And of that 9.3 million, about 41 percent, or 3.8 million, fall within the bureau's "health care and social assistance" category.

Such job growth comes on the heels of a confluence of issues that are sending more people to the doctor, including the increasing numbers in older generations, more insurance recipients from the Affordable Care Act, and a growing immigrant population.

At the same time, health care fields continue to struggle with filling vacancies, especially when it comes to rural communities and primary-care physicians, which serve as a first line of defense before specialists or the emergency room are needed.

"I think we should be worried," said Dr. Selena Hariharan, an emergency physician at Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center and an associate professor of pediatrics at the University of Cincinnati. "There's clearly going to be a shortage of health care providers. ... We really need something to make it very enticing to go into medicine, to become a doctor."

So with the two colossal problems of escalating demand and physician shortages working against each other, individual hospitals and medical groups are left to wonder: What can we do to recruit who's out there, and how do we retain them?

Certainly, there doesn't seem to be any lack of at least effort on the recruitment end. Hariharan, for example, said that despite her not even thinking about changing jobs, she receives several solicitations via email and snail mail daily.

"As far as finding the newcomers, really, it's a war out there right now," said Bruce Guyant, a regional director of physician recruiting for LifePoint Health, which has 72 hospitals across 22 states and thousands of providers.

"So these guys are like kids in a candy store," he said, noting that the average physician finishing up residency or a fellowship receives more than 500 employment solicitations. "There are so many options."

Guyant doesn't mind characterizing many of LifePoint's hundreds of annual hires as "pretty average or good."

All health care organizations "say the same thing: We hire the best physicians," he explained. "Truth be told, we'd all like to have the best physicians ... but it's impossible to do so, of course."

Acclaim or not, grabbing any physician today is growing increasingly tough, Guyant said, and selling the company's benefits have to be pushed essentially to the point of marketing.

One clear advantage recruiters can give themselves is making sure postings are on mobile-friendly sites, like PracticeMatch.com, he said. "You have to be mobile-friendly anymore in the hiring process 'cause more than 43 percent of the job seekers are using their mobile phones in job searches."

And though it used to be "something you just didn't necessarily do," they also need to be ready to talk coin from the get-go because it's often the first thing on an applicant's mind, Guyant said.

"I'm not sure if that's good, bad, right or wrong," he said, "but we've seen a shift."

Once a physician does show interest, hiring and onboarding has to take place in a flash, Guyant said, because “top talent tends to move quickly” and the physician will associate elongated hiring with how fast the hospital acts on business decisions.

If these hiring steps make it sound like the power has shifted away from the hospital and onto the job-seeking physician, it’s because that’s how today’s market is, Hariharan said. “People think, ‘If I don’t like this job, I can always move on to a new job.’”

To make sure they don’t, though, hospitals need to develop a “people-first culture,” in which physicians are treated with respect, enjoy being productive, and can care for patients without having to tend to the types of overhead duties and distractions that have been forcing out the private-practice model, Guyant said.

To start them off on the right foot, LifePoint assigns new hires a mentor to assist with the initial concerns. That veteran employee serves “as sort of a valuable reality check, I suppose you could say, until the newcomer becomes culturally integrated and literate,” Guyant said.

“Every organization has their different personality,” he added, “and so we really want to make sure that the new physician — whether they’re an experienced doc or they’re somebody coming right out of residency — that they integrate well.”

Families are typically part of the package, too, Guyant said, so spouses’ and children’s interests are learned and given potential outlets, such as PTAs or animal rescues, gymnastics or other after-school activities.

All this is followed up with regular staff meetings that ask, “How are things going? What can we do to help you?” Such monitoring ensures the hospital is fulfilling the physician’s wants, Guyant said.

“Typically, an entire onboarding strategy consists of essentially signing up the promising physician, make some necessary introductions, get them credentialed and then hope for the best,” he said.

“What happens is, though, no matter how talented that doc is, too often if they’re given the freedom to sink or swim, they usually will sink.”

Hariharan, author of the 2014 *Physician Executive Journal* article “Physician recruitment and retention: a physician’s perspective,” agrees with the hands-on approach.

“The best managers, I find, know each one of their employees as individuals, so they know what is important to each individual,” be it work-life balance, appreciation for extra effort, promotions or money, she said.

Of these, appreciation reigns supreme, she said.

“No amount of money ... makes up for the fact that people feel underappreciated

and undervalued,” Hariharan said, noting that it’s in management’s best interests to stay on its employees’ good side to avoid building a revolving door.

“Starting over like that really negatively affects productivity and revenue and building a patient volume. ... And I’m not sure that the employer always completely appreciates that factor,” she added.

One example Hariharan gave of leadership excelling by showing employees gratitude is LinkedIn.com CEO Jeff Weiner passing on \$14 million in stock bonuses following not-so-favorable earnings this year so the money could go to the employees.

Overall, devotion to employees ensures retention by creating an open and warm environment in which physicians are “jazzed about waking up in the morning and coming in [to do] what they were trained to do,” Guyant said.

“We want them to be happy,” he said, “and the best organizations who are keeping their talent are creating an environment where the docs” know they’re appreciated.